

Congresswoman reflects on first 100 days in office

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By Jamye Durrance

NEW SMYRNA BEACH - Sometimes it is hard to know whether to address Representative Suzanne Kosmas as "Congressperson" or "Congresswoman."

Luckily, Ms. Kosmas' grandchildren have come up with the perfect solution for her: "Congress Grammy."

Sitting inside a New Smyrna Beach coffeehouse during the recent congressional recess, Ms. Kosmas, 65, laughed when recalling the name, but said she loves the moniker.

"It puts it all in perspective," she said. "After all, it is about the next generations. Despite the economic crisis, (we should push for) the advancement of positive things for the next generations."

Ms. Kosmas, who represents parts of Volusia, Orange, Brevard and Seminole counties in the United States House of Representatives, recently marked her first 100 days in Washington, D.C.

"It's been great," Ms. Kosmas said. "It's very exciting and very exhilarating. I'm very honored."

Ms. Kosmas, a Democrat, defeated Republican Tom Feeney in November (she captured 61 percent of the votes in Volusia County).

After that, it was a whirlwind of activity, including witnessing President Barack Obama's historic inauguration in person.

But, after all the pomp and celebration, it was time for the New Smyrna Beach resident to get down to business.

"Obviously the times are very challenging," Ms. Kosmas said. "Florida has been particularly hit hard with foreclosures and the unemployment rate being at an all-time high. But we've been working really hard in Washington to do the right thing to get a short-term economic recovery through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and at the same time staying focused on the long-term goals, the same ones I was committed to during the campaign."

Ms. Kosmas said she is "absolutely hopeful" that the economic stimulus plan will help turn things around for Americans.

But even with small signs of an economic turnaround popping up, Ms. Kosmas knows her work is not done. She is currently serving on the House Committee on Financial Services, which is focusing on stabilizing the banking system for the long term.

"We're finding ways to ensure the taxpayers are protected by providing additional oversight so we don't find ourselves in this kind of crisis again," she said. "Being on that committee has been enlightening and rewarding."

Other big issues for Ms. Kosmas include healthcare, education, alternate energy and supporting NASA.

While serving on the House Committee on Science and Technology, Ms. Kosmas has been pushing to close the five-year gap in space flight programs at NASA in order to save thousands of jobs.

"I've been working hard to have people in a broader scope recognize the significance of NASA and manned space flight by pointing out the valuable opportunities we have in science and technology in the economy and the international world," she said. "It's something that I am deeply committed to."

So far, Ms. Kosmas has supported or sponsored bills that improve children's healthcare, provide funding for a veteran's hospital, provide tax cuts for small business owners, and reduce healthcare costs for the self-employed. She also cosponsored a bill blocking the annual Congressional pay raise.

"I think when people are in the financial situation that our constituents are in right now, it's very important for us to set an example that we aren't above it. We are making do with less," she said. "We are working on a bipartisan way to make that long-term."

Before jumping into the national arena, Ms. Kosmas served four terms in the Florida House of Representatives before being term-limited.

The switch hasn't been too difficult, she said.

"I think one of the most interesting and pleasantly surprising things that I have found is that the senior members - from both sides of the aisle - are extremely open, helpful and willing to try to work with you," she said. "And that's a very good thing. There's a good sense of collegiality."

During her campaign kick-off speech in June, Ms. Kosmas said her father didn't want her going into politics because it was "dirty rotten business."

Ms. Kosmas is confident that might be changing.

"I believe people, in good faith, are attempting to do what's best for the country," she said. "I might vehemently disagree with their perspectives, but I believe that this administration and leadership are dedicated to bringing back the faith in the process in Washington. I believe my dad would be proud of my effort to be a part of that process."

New Smyrna Beach is still home for Ms. Kosmas, who has lived here since 1973. She has four children and nine grandchildren who live in the area.

She is frequently in the area, meeting with constituents. Being chosen by those constituents to represent them in Washington is a serious job, especially during this tough time, she said.

"I'm humbled by it each time at the Capitol," Ms. Kosmas said. "I'm honored to represent the district and I know the people in the district are the reason I'm in Washington."

To be one of only 259 women to ever serve in Congress is not something that Ms. Kosmas takes lightly.

"I'm very honored," she said. "I think it's extremely important for people to see opportunities for themselves, no matter who it is. It just serves as a reminder to set goals and stick to them."